

SANTA MONICA MOUNTAINS CONSERVANCY

RAMIREZ CANYON PARK
5750 RAMIREZ CANYON ROAD
MALIBU, CALIFORNIA 90265
PHONE (310) 589-3200
FAX (310) 589-3207



July 25, 2005

Environmental Review Section
City of Los Angeles Planning
200 North Spring Street, Room 763
Los Angeles, California 90012-4801

Stephen S. Wise Middle School Relocation Project
DEIR Comments - ENV-2003-4563- EIR - SCH No. 2003101055

Dear Environmental Review Section:

The Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy's concerns with the subject school relocation and expansion project revolve around maximizing the aesthetics of the Mulholland Scenic Parkway, the connectivity between habitat patches, and the net amount of open space acres in the area.

Inadequate Wildlife Corridor Analysis

The proposed project involves major construction next to Mulholland Drive in two locations. Both of these proposed construction sites either abut or encompass the substantial sized habitat area between the existing High School and existing nursery school. This natural area provides both habitat and an irreplaceable wildlife movement corridor between the Mission Canyon area and a smaller network of habitat patches located north of Mulholland Drive. In addition this habitat patch provides the only direct connection for wildlife to access the Mulholland Drive bridge over the San Diego (405) Freeway. The Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) is deficient for providing zero acknowledgment or analysis about the site's contribution to wildlife movement to habitat located north of Mulholland Drive.

The DEIR is also deficient in its analysis of the relationship of the subject project to wildlife movement across the 405 Freeway. Every conclusion made in this analysis is based the Roth (2001) wildlife corridor study. Roth may discount the value of the Mulholland Drive -405 Freeway bridge as a freeway crossing structure relative to the Sepulveda Boulevard, Skirball Drive, and Bel Air Crest crossing structures. This total lack of independent thought misses several key points.

The first point is that the Mulholland Drive overpass is the only crossing structure that spans both the freeway and Sepulveda Boulevard. Traffic pressures will continue to add pressure for mass transit and lane expansion projects through the length of the Sepulveda

City of Los Angeles Planning
Stephen Wise School Relocation DEIR Comments
July 25, 2005
Page 2

Pass transportation corridor. The odds of the three currently superior freeway-crossing-structures functioning at their current levels in twenty-five years unfortunately cannot be counted on. For example, already the night lighting and traffic congestion at the Skirball Drive bridge is a considerable impediment to wildlife movement. The recent Sepulveda Boulevard Task Force commissioned by CD 11 was fixated on further reducing the meager shoulder width of the road under the freeway. Things change and whether adequate mitigation funds and political will be in place to compensate for such change is a great unknown.

The second point is that the Mulholland Drive bridge possesses superior potential for enhancement. Given its substantially smaller 2 am to 5 am traffic volume than the other three freeway crossing structures along Sepulveda Boulevard, the bridge also offers superior traffic conditions. The wildlife aversion to use of the bridge because of road kill potential referred to in the DEIR may be true. However, such a conclusion lacks any vision and foresight. Before discounting the importance of project design and mitigation measures to maintain and improve the wildlife corridor capability of the Mulholland Drive bridge, an adequate analysis of the issue must consider the future capability of the bridge for wildlife movement (by itself and relative to the other three crossing structures). For example the superstructure of the now plentifully wide bridge may be adequate to support a low weight bearing deck on one side to facilitate wildlife movement (permanently free of all lights, cars, pedestrians and with a dirt surface and intermittent native vegetation.) Europe is twenty years ahead of this country in employing such ingenuity.

The loss of substantive wildlife movement capability across the 405 Freeway directly reduces the population viability of numerous mammal species in the Santa Monica Mountains east of the 405 Freeway including the whole of Griffith Park. Ten years ago the value of all the types of freeway crossing structures over or under the 405 Freeway and that are addressed in this letter were questioned by many biologists. Now most all biologists advocate protecting all available and all potential sites for wildlife movement, particularly over freeways and busy arterial streets. The proof is in the pudding in terms of numerous recent mountain lion sightings east of the 405 (including in Griffith Park) and a steady rise in frequent bobcat sightings in the same area. Another note on the Roth (2001) study is that the data collection method was not comprehensive and was for a short interval. Much too short of an interval to write off the Mulholland bridge as a regionally valuable wildlife crossing structure.

The subject DEIR is clearly deficient until it adequately discloses and analyses the existing and potential value of the Mulholland Drive bridge for wildlife movement. The subject DEIR is further deficient for not addressing how wildlife approach the Mulholland bridge from the west where the proposed school expansion is located. The effects of proposed and potential future fencing, lighting, paving, and conversion of non-native open space to building area on this potential resource must be addressed in the FEIR.

A step above this would have the FEIR include substantive mitigation measures that maximize the wildlife movement capability of the subject section of the Mulholland Drive right-of-way and a contributory section of the school's property. We encourage all members of the Institutional Corridor of the Mulholland Scenic Parkway to participate in the protection and maximization of wildlife resources in the Santa Monica Mountains. The current net contribution of all Institutional Corridor members is zero. The zero arises from no permanent land protection and no permanent mitigation measures directly designed, and equally effective, to facilitate wildlife movement. We urge the City and the applicant to take these comments to heart and produce project changes and mitigation measure to further this critical resource management effort. Without a strong effort from this project, we urge you to deny the application. The types of mitigation measures recommended are of a relatively low cost and eliminate almost no useable area from the project.

The lack of such an effort to date is probably that of a lack of understanding. Under any scenario the FEIR will remain deficient without this effort and an excellent graphics depicting existing and proposed conditions for wildlife movement. In particular the Mulholland Drive right-of-way should be devoted to public purposes (wildlife movement and trails) to the maximum extent possible above and beyond the private use of a school. The school has ample property to solve landscaping and traffic issues.

The following information is critical to a wildlife corridor analysis. Our NOP letter requested,

“To help the public and decision makers with understanding the area, the DEIR should include as many figures and maps as necessary to show the exact parcel boundaries of every property located in the aerial photograph labeled Figure A-3 in the distributed Environmental Assessment Form and Initial Study. These new figures must use the most up to date City of Los Angeles parcel data to be accurate. The figures should clearly label any property that is permanently protected by deed restriction, condition of approval, or public ownership. The figures should indicate the exact ownership of every non-residential parcel in the subject area.”

None of that information was included in the DEIR. The FEIR will remain deficient if it does not include this information. The school should provide permanent protection for all remaining open space, graded and ungraded. The school must disclose what real property is available or not available for such protection.

As state in our NOP comments, and again fully ignored, the DEIR should clearly lay out any and all mitigation measures and conditions of approval in the certified EIR for the Stephen Wise High School project and the City's project approval, respectively, that addresses the protection, minimized disturbance, landscaping and fencing of areas without buildings. The current fencing of the northern portions of the existing High School is an unfortunate impediment to wildlife movement.

The DEIR is deficient for not including an alternative that maximizes wildlife movement potential above the Sepulveda Tunnel both to the Mulholland Drive freeway overcrossing and to the open space network north of Mulholland Drive. To be permanently effective this alternative must require the dedication of conservation easements to at least two public agencies. Those conservation easements must include every portion of wildlife movement areas that the project applicant controls. That requirement should also apply to all the applicant's property that is not part of subject application. One of the reasons that the Conservancy did not request conditions on the prior High School approval is that the project left the now proposed Middle School site open for habitat and wildlife movement purposes. The project appears to have an unmitigable adverse effect on the wildlife approach and reception area on the west side of the freeway overpass. An unfenced gap between the existing High School and proposed Middle School may be the only solution. This gap would have to be total free of any light shine between mid-night and 5 AM and be a minimum of 75-feet-wide.

Best Use of Public Right of Way

In general, the fee rights-of-way of Mulholland Drive have been consumed for private uses (some permitted, some unpermitted) along the length of the scenic parkway. The DEIR should clearly show what uses, disturbances and permanently required enhancements are proposed in the rights-of-way. The best public purpose for the rights-of-way is to leave them entirely open and planted with just native plants. In addition the Mulholland Drive Core Trail as required in the Specific Plan should be accommodated on both sides of Mulholland Drive on all portions of the street controlled by the applicant. The project makes no provision for the Mulholland Core Trail. The FEIR will remain deficient if it does not address fully this issue and provide adequate project design elements or mitigation measures.

The proposed installation of a playing field with lighting in the public right-of-way is sub-optimal. The DEIR should include an alternative for this portion of the project that includes

only irrigated native vegetation in the Mulholland right-of-way with no fencing or lighting or pavement. Is a private playing field in the public right-of-way a gift of public funds? The FEIR will remain deficient if it does not include this information.

In general, the FEIR must address how the proposed lighting of the project, and all relevant FEIR alternatives, could adversely effect wildlife usage of, and passage through, all abutting open space areas. Adequate mitigation of lighting impacts must include a diagram showing the extent of light shine, or illuminance, on all abutting patches of open space. The actual limits of such light shine/illuminance must be a documented mitigation condition in the FEIR to be enforceable and enduring. The FEIR will remain deficient if it does not include this information.

Please direct any questions or future correspondence to Paul Edelman of our staff at (310) 589-3200 ext. 128 and at the above address.

Sincerely,

ELIZABETH A. CHEADLE
Chairperson